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Project Self-Esteem: Reactions of Middle and Lower Class Black Parents to an Elementary School Black Studies Program

Sanford Golin, Ph.D.*

It has frequently been observed that one of the sequelae of racism has been the development of a negative self-image for many Black Americans, that is, the incorporation of the often heard antithesis, "white is good and black is bad" (e.g., Clark, 1965; Erikson, 1966; Poussaint, 1966). To the extent that this observation is true, racism can be viewed as a potential mental health hazard and, indeed, has been so considered (Albee, 1970; Grier & Cobbs, 1968).

Intervention aimed at the prevention of mental illness has been seen as encompassing both the promotion of positive mental health and protection against those factors which have the potential for producing mental illness (Brown, 1961). The elimination of racism, it goes without saying, can be held to be the sine qua non for the prevention of mental distress related to race prejudice. From another point of view the recent "black consciousness" movement can, in part, also be conceptualized as a form of primary prevention insofar as the development of racial pride and awareness can contribute to the positive ego development. It was within the context of the promotion of positive mental health that a Black studies program was carried out during the past two years in three Pittsburgh elementary schools which are located in black communities. This project, called Project Self-Esteem, which has been fully described elsewhere (Golin, 1970; Golin, Davis, Zuckerman, & Harrison, 1970) involved three classes per week in

Black art, dance,and music as well as related after-school and field trip programs. Psychometric data comparing the approximately 200 Project children, all of whom were black, with a comparable control group has indicated that the Black studies program has had a significant affect on improvement of mental health of male children (Golin, in press).

If programs such as Project Self-Esteem can foster psychological growth, it may be important to know to what extent it is feasible to develop such programs. Experience (Golin et al., 1970) has already shown much community support for the development of Project Self-Esteem among those members of the community who are active in community affairs. The extent to which parents might approve or disapprove of such a school program for their children, however, had not been investigated. The black consciousness movement which was beginning to accelerate about the time Project Self-Esteem was initiated reflected a desire among Black leaders to remain in and renew ghettoized communities. Similarly, Project Self-Esteem, through its programs oriented around the theme "Black is beautiful", was concerned with the beauty to be found in the local neighborhood; children in the art and after-school photography program, for example, were involved in the drawing, photographing, and appreciation of the beauty of the people and natural objects in their communities. Since most parents in ghettoized communities have long been seeking to escape the ghetto (e.g., Rainwater, 1970) it seemed possible that many parents might resent a program for their children which might have seemed to conflict with their desire to flee the ghetto. For Project Self-Esteem, therefore, the hypothesis was entertained that there would be more

disapproval of the project among those parents whose aspirations were more likely to be challenged by it, that is, among lower class families living in the ghetto. To test this hypothesis the opinions of parents of children from a lower class school in a ghettoized community were compared with those of parents and other caretakers of children from a lower middle class, predominantly black, school located in another part of the city. This report presents the results of the comparisons of the opinions of these two groups of individuals.

In order to assess parental attitude a sample of homes from two of the three Project schools was selected for study. School A was a lower class school from a ghettoized area of Pittsburgh; many of the families within this community were receiving some form of public assistance. School B, the lower middle class school, was located in a "black pocket" in another part of the city; parents within this area were engaged in white collar, technical, and semi-professional employment. Interviews were conducted in a sample of 55 school A homes and 68 school B homes during the last week of May, 1969, eight months after the beginning of Project Self-Esteem. Each respondent was asked to answer the following seven questions: 1) How much do you know about Project Self-Esteem, 2) What do you think of the project, 3) What do you think about the teaching of African history and culture in the public schools, 4) What do you think about the teaching of Afro-American history in the public schools, 5) Do you believe this project has had any effect on your child, 6) What is your opinion of the public schools, and 7) What do you think about community control of the schools, in general.

The interviews were conducted by ten persons, nine mothers and

one father, who were members of the PTA's of the three Project Schools. Each interviewer received two hours instruction in basic principles of interviewing. Payment for the interviews was made on a fee for interview basis to the PTA treasury; the interviews thus became a PTA project as well as a contribution toward a community study. The interviewer informed each respondent that she (or he) was conducting a survey for Project Self-Esteem, a program being conducted in the public school in which their child was enrolled. The interviewer then asked the respondent if she had heard of the project and, after noting the reply, briefly described the project to all respondents and continued with the remaining questions. It has sometimes been stated that survey data collected by social scientists in ghettoized communities can, due to distrust and caution on the part of respondents, be of questionable accuracy. The extent to which data obtained from ghettoized communities is any less reliable than data obtained elsewhere is largely a matter of conjecture (cf. Rainwater, 1970); it was hoped, nevertheless, that the present use of interviewers who were known in the community would enhance the accuracy of the data.

RESULTS

Of the 123 persons interviewed, 112 (91%) were the child's mother, with the remaining 11 (9%) distributed among fathers (5) and other relatives (6).

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 1 shows that approximately three-fourths of the respondents knew at least a little about the project (question 1). The replies to

question 2 indicated that 86.2% of all the respondents, based on their own knowledge or knowledge provided by the interviewer, approved of Project Self-Esteem. Only 3 persons (2.4%) indicated disapproval of the project. When Schools A and B were compared it was found that significantly more respondents from the middle class school (B) indicated strong approval than those from school A. ($\chi^2 = 5.23$, $p < .05$). As hypothesized, middle class parents were more approving of the project; although indicating less strong approval, the majority of lower class parents, nevertheless, still approved of the project.

The responses to questions 3 and 4, which concerned attitudes toward the teaching of African and Afro-American History in the public schools, were consistent with the responses to question 2, viz., the large majority of the respondents approved of the teaching of such subjects in the public schools. Though the large majority approved of such teaching several parents indicated strong disapproval. The three parents who disapproved of Project Self-Esteem were also among those who disapproved of the teaching of such courses. Most of the respondents who disapproved were from the middle class school (B) with the difference between the two schools in this regard being statistically significant for the teaching of Afro-American History ($\chi^2 = 7.71$, $p < .01$). It appeared, therefore, that the middle class school showed more extremes of opinion, that is, more school B respondents indicated disapproval of the teaching of African and Afro-American history as well as strong approval of the project.

A majority (61%) of the respondents indicated they believed that Project Self-Esteem had a positive effect on their child, a result which was in accord with the observed approval of the project. Only

one reply indicated a negative effect. No significant differences between schools A and B with regard to the frequency of positive and other effects were found. When the nature of the positive effects were compared, however, interesting differences emerged between the two schools. Each respondent who indicated a positive or negative effect was asked to elaborate their answer; these elaborations were then categorized with the following results: 1) enjoys activities, 23.6%, 2) increased pride in race, 17.9%, 3) increased self-esteem or reduced shyness, 8.1%, 4) increased enthusiasm about school, 1.6%, 5) no answer, 48.8%. Chi square comparisons indicated that lower class (A) respondents were more likely to cite increase in pride and self-esteem as the observed positive effect whereas middle class respondents (B) were more likely to indicate enjoyment of the activities ($\chi^2 = 5.68$, $p < .07$).

The following comments are representative of elaborations to question 5 by those indicating a positive effect: 1) "he is very enthused about the music end of it; he talks about it constantly; he feels important. Before it was just to school and back home, now he has the self-esteem interest. He is more talkative than ever before. He now has his thing to relate to", 2) "he has more determination to reach goals toward making himself a better person. He notices more of his neighborhood and other surroundings and takes interest toward improving his area", and 3) "he is very proud of his accomplishments in the project. He is more aggressive and confident but I do not approve of his aggressiveness. The confidence relates to the African studies he has had but I disapprove of any African connections". It is interesting to note the ambivalence of this latter respondent who was one of the relatively few who indicated disapproval of teaching of African and Afro-American

History.

It was surprising that only 13.8% of the interviewees felt that the schools were doing a poor job while approximately one-half indicated they felt the schools were doing a good job (question 6). Analysis of the elaborations of the 36.6% who indicated the schools were doing a "fair" job, however, showed that this reply masked criticism of the schools. Sixty five per cent of those who indicated "fair job" had specific criticisms of the schools; most frequently mentioned were, "overcrowded classrooms" and "need more special academic programs in primary and elementary grades". No significant differences between schools A and B were found with regard to the general evaluation of the schools.

Respondents were asked to what extent they endorsed the concept of community control, that is, felt that parents should play a role in curriculum and personnel decisions (question 7). Surprisingly, as Table 1 shows, it was found that there was by no means overwhelming support for control of the schools by members of the local community. Less than one third of the respondents approved of "community control" while over one third indicated disapproval of this concept. Further, it was clear that many more middle class respondents approved of community control than lower class respondents ($\chi^2 = 16.20$, $p < .001$).

A test was made of the hypothesis that individuals who strongly approved of community control would also approve of the teaching of African and Afro-American History and be less likely to be of the opinion that the schools "were doing a good job". No significant relationship was found between the strong approval of community control and approval of the reading of African and Afro-American History. Only

three of ten respondents who indicated strong approval of community control replied that the schools "were doing a good job" while 15 of 25 of those who indicated strong disapproval approved of the schools. This result, though suggestive that approval of community control is related to disapproval of the schools, was not statistically significant.

CONCLUSIONS

The deleterious effects of racism on the development of a positive self-concept among Black Americans has often been observed. The inclusion of programs of "black consciousness" in public elementary school curricula can be viewed, from a public health standpoint, as a form of primary prevention. The results of the present study indicate that such school programs are likely to be endorsed by most parents in the black community. Differences between middle and lower class parents, however, were observed. Middle class parents were found to be more likely to show strong approval than lower class parents. Middle class parents, however, were also more likely to show disapproval of such programs, though the number who showed disapproval was relatively small. Middle class parents, then, appear to show more extremes of opinion, though most showed approval of the program. It is possible that lower class parents were less to likely to indicate strong approval of the project because "Black studies" may be seen as conflicting with their hopes of leaving the ghetto and providing the "good life" for themselves and their children (Rainwater, 1970). Though lower class parents showed some reluctance to indicate strong approval, the general endorsement of the project probably reflected changes in attitude toward black consciousness which had occurred recently within the black community as

a result of the influence of the media and the institution of adult community classes in Black History.

Lower class parents were more likely to see the benefits of Black history programs as residing in "bringing out the black race" and enhancing self-esteem; middle class parents, on the other hand, were more likely to emphasize the interest provided by the new school activities. Middle class parents were also more likely to approve of "community control" of the schools. Such approval appeared related to criticism of the schools in general but not to the teaching of Black studies in particular.

The disapproval of Black studies shown by some middle class parents seemed to reflect concerns that such programs may result in children becoming less manageable and may lead to "Black racism" and a mobilization of hostile impulses. Though such concerns were found to exist, they were relatively infrequent among the Black parents surveyed in this research.

In summary, approval of an elementary school Black studies program was found among both lower class and middle class parents. The extent and reasons for endorsement, however, differed between the two groups.

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Table 1

Frequency of Responses to Questionnaire Items

Question / Response	School A N	School A Per Cent	School B N	School B Per Cent	Total N	Total Per Cent
1. Knowledge of Project						
a. nothing	17	30.9	17	25.0	34	27.6
b. a little	30	54.5	36	52.9	66	53.7
c. somewhat	5	9.1	11	16.2	16	13.0
d. very much	3	5.5	4	5.9	7	5.7
2. Opinion of Project						
a. strongly approve	8	14.5	22	32.4	30	24.4
b. approve	39	71.0	37	54.4	76	61.8
c. neutral	8	14.5	4	5.9	12	9.8
d. disapprove	0	0	0	0	0	0
e. strongly disapprove	0	0	3	4.4	3	2.4
f. no opinion	0	0	2	2.9	2	1.6
3. Teaching of African History						
a. strongly disapprove	3	5.5	7	10.3	10	8.1
b. disapprove	0	0	4	5.9	4	3.3
c. neutral	5	9.1	4	5.9	9	7.3
d. approve	27	49.0	30	44.1	57	46.3
e. strongly approve	18	32.7	22	32.4	40	32.5
f. no opinion	2	3.7	1	1.4	3	2.4

Table 1 (continued)

Question Response	School A N	School A Per Cent	School B N	School B Per Cent	Total N	Total Per Cent
4. Teaching of Afro-American History						
a. strongly approve	27	49.1	26	38.2	53	43.1
b. approve	22	40.0	28	41.2	50	40.6
c. neutral	4	7.3	2	2.9	6	4.9
d. disapprove	0	0	2	2.9	2	1.6
e. strongly disapprove	0	0	9	13.3	9	7.3
f. no opinion	2	3.6	1	1.4	3	2.4
5. Effect on Child						
a. positive effect	31	56.4	44	64.7	75	61.0
b. no effect	22	40.0	20	29.4	42	34.1
c. negative effect	1	1.8	0	0	1	0.8
d. no opinion	1	1.8	4	5.9	5	4.1
6. Opinion of Schools						
a. poor job	7	12.8	10	14.7	17	13.8
b. fair job	19	34.5	26	38.2	45	36.6
c. good job	29	52.7	31	45.6	60	48.8
d. no opinion	0	0	1	1.5	1	0.8

Table 1 (continued)

Question / Response	School A N	School A Per Cent	School B N	School B Per Cent	Total N	Total Per Cent
7. Community Control						
a. strongly approve	1	1.8	9	13.2	10	8.1
b. approve	5	9.1	21	30.9	26	21.1
c. neutral	20	36.4	15	22.1	35	28.4
d. disapprove	10	18.2	12	17.7	22	17.9
e. strongly disapprove	16	29.1	9	13.2	25	20.3
f. no opinion	3	5.4	2	2.9	5	4.1